



ART AS ADAPTATION?

Cultural Storytelling from
the Rakhaine of Bangladesh



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UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, HOBART



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Contents

About the authors	1
Patrick Kirkby.....	1
Hannah Poon.....	1
Elaine Stratford.....	1
Art as Adaptation?	2
The Rakhaine	4
Art: collaboration to empower	7
Our livelihoods.....	11
Our history in Awazonway.....	12
Our climate is changing	13
We live in unity.....	14
We strive to build peace.....	15
We work together	16
We strive for morality.....	17
We are compassionate.....	18
We respect our Elders.....	19
We are all equal	20
We respect nature	21
We cope with cyclones.....	22
We celebrate festivals	23
What was achieved?.....	24
Outcomes for participants.....	24
Outcomes for facilitators.....	26
Outcomes for the community.....	27
Other outcomes.....	27
Concluding remarks.....	28
<i>Afterword</i>	29

About the authors



Patrick Kirkby

Patrick is a PhD candidate in Human Geography at the University of Tasmania, investigating the role of culture in community-based adaptation to climate change. Patrick's research involves ethnographic work in collaboration with the Rakhaine community of Bangladesh. Patrick has a passion for the environment, geopolitics, sustainable human development, and social justice. He has managed several not-for-profit initiatives in Bangladesh, Viet Nam, and Sri Lanka; has strong and sustained involvement in international movements for climate justice and sustainability; and in 2014 was Tasmanian Young Environmentalist of the Year.



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Hannah is a Canadian artist and social worker. Her passion lies at the intersection of community arts, community development, and social justice. Hannah's practice has focused on facilitating creative engagement for marginalised populations, and her programs offer opportunities for participants to explore their creativity, build new skills, reflect, and develop new relationships. Many of her projects have a strong social justice focus, enabling dialogue about social issues that participants are facing. Hannah's initiatives have involved mural painting, theatre, quilt-making, bookmaking, printmaking, music, and place-making, and have been located in Canada, the USA, Colombia, and Bangladesh.



Elaine Stratford

Elaine is an Associate Professor in the Discipline of Geography and Spatial Sciences at the University of Tasmania. Elaine is internationally known for her work in island studies and insights on the geographies, mobilities, and rhythms of the life-course. In her engagement with the arts Elaine has, for example, worked with Tasmanian artist Colin Langridge, exploring artistic interventions into the geopolitics of islands, and examined young people's creative explorations of resilience to climate change with Melbourne-based New Zealander Nic Low. Elaine has also facilitated numerous events at several *Ten Days on the Island* international art festivals.

Art as Adaptation?

It is widely recognised that climate change is occurring, partly because of cumulative effects of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Such climatic change is already affecting human and environmental systems globally, and will continue to do so with increasing severity for the foreseeable future.^{1,2} Regrettably, weak progress has been made to mitigate climate change, and intergovernmental mechanisms fail to result in adequate and binding emissions reduction targets.³ Scientists are now urging planners to anticipate the potential for a 4°C or higher rise in average mean surface temperature, and prepare for associated perturbations to the global climatic system that such a change would effect.⁴ It is from such concerns that the imperative of adaptation becomes apparent—adjustments made to moderate harm and exploit beneficial opportunities of a changing climate. Adaptation is rapidly growing in prominence in global discourses, sciences, policies, and actions on climate change.⁵ As global efforts on adaptation are shifting from planning to implementation, and as interest in, and support and financing for, adaptation expand rapidly, it becomes crucial that researchers, practitioners, policy makers, governments, and advocates continue to work together to find ways to make adaptation more effective, cost-efficient, ethical, and socio-culturally appropriate.

A vital consideration here is that those most vulnerable to the effects of global climate change, and with least capacity to adapt and cope, tend to be members of poor and marginalised communities in developing nations and regions.⁶ Ironically, such communities have contributed the least to global climate change, because they produce very low levels of greenhouse gases.⁷ Thus climate change emerges as a crisis of social and environmental injustice—termed *climate justice*.⁸

Climate justice is presented as a twin imperative. On one hand, climate justice requires individuals, groups, organisations, and governments in industrialised regions to drastically reduce emissions. On the other hand, climate justice invites adaptation support to those most vulnerable and with the lowest adaptive capacity.⁹ Such support must steer clear of a paternalistic approach that experts from ‘elsewhere’ hold the necessary knowledge, resources, and power to have a monopoly on communities’ adaptation futures.¹⁰ It is crucial that adaptation is partly driven from the bottom-up, providing local communities with rights to participation and self-determination, such that they *are at the centre* of any programs meant to assist them.¹¹ Without such assurances, we risk a ‘perfect moral storm’.¹²

One approach to climate change adaptation has emerged from the development sector. Known as community-based adaptation to climate

change, CBA is a bottom-up approach that aims to reduce the vulnerabilities of local communities, and enhance their capacity to adapt to climatic variability and change.¹³ CBA starts with communities' expressed priorities and needs, and seeks to build upon their various knowledges, skills, experiences, and cultural norms.¹⁴

Our team came to this project with the shared view that although local cultural contexts play a critical role in influencing community-level adaptation pathways and outcomes, most CBA programs have yet to fully engage with the cultural contexts of those communities they seek to support.¹⁵ We contend that *working within local cultural contexts* means paying full attention to the beliefs, values, motivations, and worldviews of local peoples, and noting where this attention is mediated by our own positions. In addition, we were concerned that no prior research had investigated the extent to which, as an expression of local culture, the arts could contribute to and *enhance* CBA and the outcomes hoped for it. We sought to understand how and in what ways the arts invite powerful and creative expressions of a community's cultural dynamics in the face of significant challenges such as climate change and its corollaries.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the arts take us out of ourselves, and invite us to explore and challenge stereotypes and assumptions, release imagination to open up new perspectives, and identify alternative future.¹⁷ Community art initiatives provide symbolic and creative settings for social interaction and transformational change, and furnish space for people to develop convivial atmospheres and common approaches to sharing ideas, understanding one another, working together, building relationships, and creating the scaffolding for mutually beneficial futures.¹⁸ Such programs also enrich understandings about both identity and culture that can inform populist and academic insights into questions about how we are to thrive rather than simply survive.¹⁹

In this vein, we sought to develop and implement a community arts program, based on a CBA modality. We developed this program together with the Rakhaine of Bangladesh, an indigenous community living in highly vulnerable circumstances—a community that we collaborate with as part of our broader research work. We have been invited to work with the Rakhaine to investigate and build upon their inherent socio-cultural capacities, in the face of challenging circumstances and change. In what follows, we report on the results of that engagement, and present a selection of artwork and stories generated by members of the community. Finally, we reflect on whether such community art initiatives could be scaled outwards and upwards to assist other communities seeking to build their capacities to adapt to vulnerabilities and to foster various forms of resilience.

The Rakhaine

The Rakhaine are a Buddhist farming community living in the low-lying deltaic coastal belt of Bangladesh (Figure 1).²⁰ The ancestral roots of the Rakhaine lie in the once-sovereign state of Arakan—what is now the western coastal belt of Myanmar (Figure 2). There, in 1784, genocide inflicted by Burmese colonisers triggered the Rakhaine exodus. One group of Rakhaine that fled Arakan, comprising one hundred and fifty families, sailed across the treacherous waters of the Bay of Bengal and landed upon the uninhabited island of Rangabali, then dominated by jungle. The British, who controlled the area at the time primarily through the operations of The East India Company, welcomed the Rakhaine, and encouraged them to settle, clear forests, and bring lands under cultivation. Over time, the Rakhaine came to be considered the Indigenous Peoples of the land, and thus its traditional owners. Early on, the Rakhaine suffered significant hardship due to lack of fresh water, high incidence of disease, attacks from wild animals, and crop failure, and recurrent cyclones and tidal bores—powerful waves travelling up rivers and against their currents. Yet, the Rakhaine overcame such adversities and, by the twentieth century, had established a self-sufficient culture with a population exceeding fifteen thousand people, dispersed amongst four hundred villages in what are now districts of Bangladesh known as Patuakhali and Barguna.

Bangladesh itself is commonly framed as the nation in the world most vulnerable to climate change.²¹ That vulnerability is a function of its geophysical exposure to tropical cyclones, tidal bores, sea level rise, monsoonal flooding and seasonal drought, as well as high levels of poverty, high population density, poor provision of infrastructure, the common incidence of environmental degradation, and weak governance. The vulnerability of the Rakhaine is further exacerbated by their marginalisation as a minority group, as well as by limited financial means, geographical remoteness, reliance on rain-fed agriculture, and landlessness.²²



Figure 1. Rakhaine life and culture.

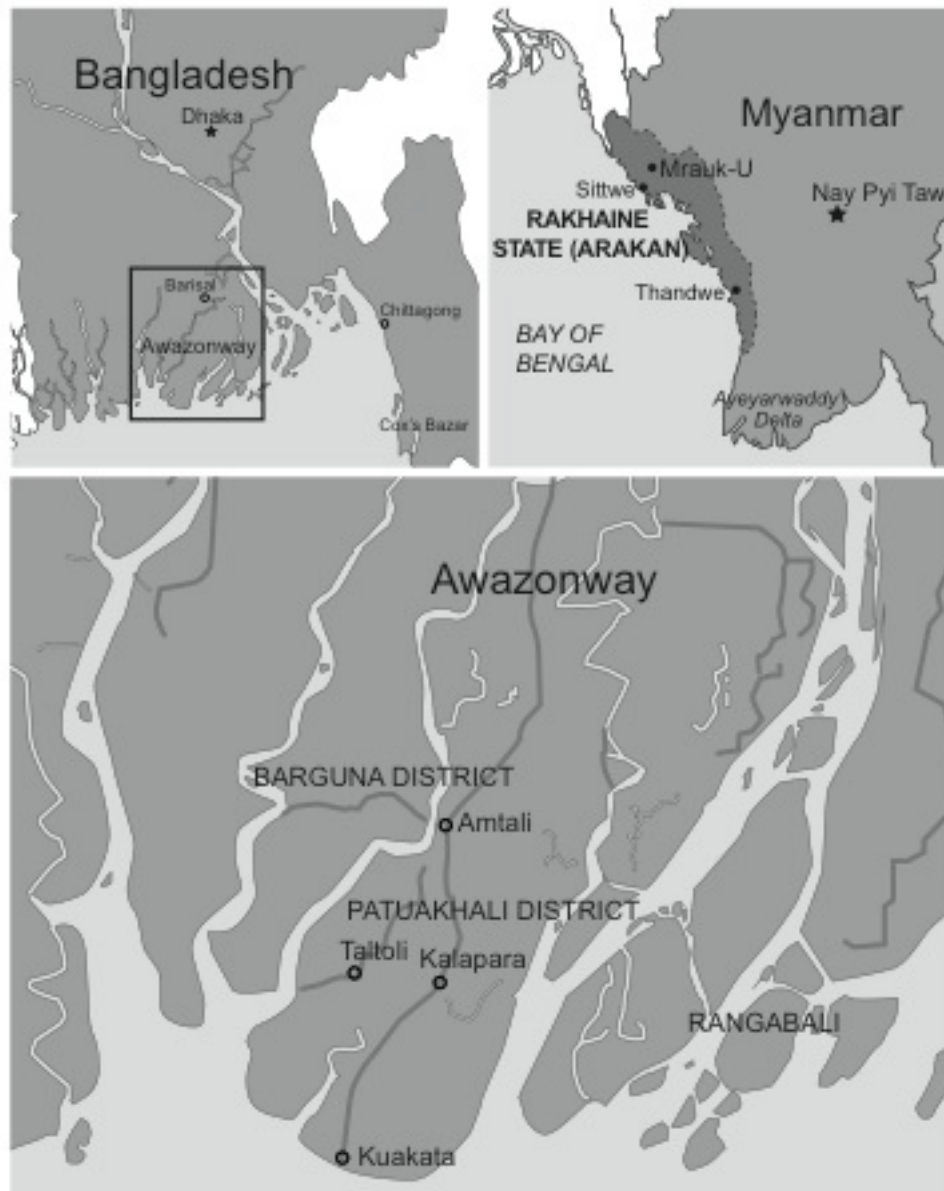


Figure 2. Locality map, showing the Rakhaine settlement areas in Patuakhali and Barguna districts of south-west coastal Bangladesh, as well as their ancestral homeland in Arakan—now the coastal belt of Myanmar.

The last of these conditions, landlessness, warrants brief elaboration. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the southern coastal area of Bangladesh was devastated by a number of catastrophic cyclones and tidal bores. Thousands lost their lives, entire villages were destroyed, and the accumulated wealth and assets of the people were practically wiped out. Thousands more emigrated back to ancestral homes in Burma. Simultaneously, the Bengali Muslim majority started to colonise the area *en-masse*, and significant tracts of Rakhaine lands were appropriated by Bengali settlers.

Some three thousand Rakhaine now live as a minority group in a total of thirty-one villages, dispersed across the districts of Patuakhali and Barguna. Approximately seventeen thousand others live in the Cox's Bazar area of coastal eastern Bangladesh (engagement with them has been outside the scope of this collaboration).

Thus, although once owners of vast tracts of land, the Rakhaine have since become poor and predominantly landless. Despite difficult circumstances, they remain a tolerant people, and uphold their faith, community, family, and sense of hope (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Rakhaine life and culture.

Art: collaboration to empower

The term ‘geohumanities’ captures what it means to map, reflect, represent, and perform a range of social, spatial, and environmental dynamics—not least among them climate change and adaptations to it. The geohumanities extend the ‘power of the geographical imagination, its range, substance and complication, as expressed in [conversations], maps, photographs, paintings, films, novels, poems, performances, monuments, buildings, travelers’ tales and geography texts’.²³

Such potential informed five ideas underpinning the project: the artist is an important ‘interlocutor’ in diverse geographical imaginaries;²⁴ participatory arts practices influence geographical subjectivities; people have significant capacities as geopolitical subjects; working together, communities and artists do produce transformative insights about the world; and artistic expression could be a powerful focus for building adaptive capacity in response to climate change.

The collaboration that we describe in the pages that follow has been supported by the University of Tasmania’s Arts Environment Research Group. The AERG:

is an interdisciplinary grouping that brings together scholars working in the general surroundings in which we live. ‘Environment’ can include the imagined, built and man-made [sic] as well as the natural and industrial environments we operate within. The group meets on a regular basis and especially welcomes scholarship applicants with a particular interest in change, threat, management and human impact that can be located but also traverse the visual arts, design, theatre, performance, film and video, architecture, creative writing, media and journalism and music—applied in collaboration with the sciences, social sciences and humanities.²⁵

Funding enabled Patrick and Hannah to run four collaborative art workshops in July 2014 with members of the Rakhaine communities. The workshops were piloted as an empowering method for community members to explore cultural capacities, strengths, and assets, and to express their perspectives in creative, artistic, and especially visual forms. Group discussions were initiated for participants to explore their culture, including their values, ethics, and beliefs, and to share how culture has given them strength to overcome hardship, build resilience, and adapt to their challenging circumstances.

Participants were invited to create block prints using Styrofoam plates and other discarded, organic and/or recycled materials, and to explore both the prints and the perspectives that informed their creation, through storytelling.

Workshops were offered in local venues in settlements around the aforementioned Barguna and Patuakhali districts. Established local partners and community representatives welcomed this opportunity, participated in planning workshops, and provided assistance with organisation. Workshops were then promoted by Patrick, with assistance from members of local non-government organisations and community associations and schoolteachers. The workshops were free, and participation was encouraged across generations and genders irrespective of social status. A local research assistant helped with translation and facilitation.

The project was also subject to a full ethics approval process, which is required under guidelines stipulated by the Australian Government via the National Health and Medical Research Council.²⁶ Those guidelines required that participants provided informed consent, after being advised about their rights to privacy, protection from risk, how their art and stories would be used in our research and publications, and their capacity to withdraw at any time from their engagement with us.

Our hope was that the art workshops would enable the Rakhaine to tap into and further develop their socio-cultural capacities, and assist them to continue to build resilience to both climatic and non-climatic pressures. To such ends, our approach was to use storytelling and creative art making to invite the Rakhaine to reflect on and affirm the strengths of their culture.

We designed the art workshops to provide social interaction that would augment opportunities the Rakhaine already sought to deepen social cohesion, solidarity, and collective identity. We endeavoured to empower the community to run the workshops, and thus focused our efforts on achieving community ownership and local empowerment. To such ends, we ran a one-day training program with a team of nine Rakhaine community members, who became workshop facilitators.

The training program employed games from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, an emancipatory and interactive theatre-based technique used as a means of promoting social and political change.²⁷ In creating such theatre-based methodologies, Boal was inspired by the educational movement of *critical pedagogy*—'guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action'.²⁸ Boal's strategies were used with

the Rakhaine facilitators to initiate dialogue around community development and leadership. The facilitators then worked with us to determine the roles that they would take in delivering the art workshops (Figure 4).

Block printing on styrofoam was chosen as a suitable art medium, since it is low-cost, takes little time, involves no prior experience or particular skill to produce novel and beautiful artwork, is easily transportable, and allows artwork to be re-printed numerous times. Block printing also has a rich history, with roots in Asian culture, and is a powerful means for storytelling about culture and history.



Figure 4. Facilitation discussions with the Rakhaine.

Art workshops were run in three Rakhaine villages—Taltoli Rua, Betlia Rua, and Pratharashang Rua, and the males and females who participated ranged in age from ten to sixty years, and including artists and non-artists. The workshops were inaugurated by local elders, who shared personalised stories of the cultural strengths of the Rakhaine to set the scene and inspire participants to reflect on the strengths of their culture and develop their own stories about those assets.

Storytelling, of course, engages and inspires audiences, and facilitates discussion around common purposes.²⁹ It resonates with traditional and modern cultures alike. Amenable to this way of sharing and communicating, participants developed their own cultural stories, learned the techniques of block printing, and expressed their visions for resilience in creative ways that empowered them to think about the future in a positive light (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Storytelling in circle, Rakhaine art workshops.

At the conclusion of each workshop, Hannah and Patrick asked if they might select a number of block prints that exemplify the cultural strengths of the Rakhaine. The block print plates of these exemplars were brought back to Australia to be reprinted for this final publication. The stories told by the Rakhaine were also translated into English and collated, and accompany the image plates that follow.

Our livelihoods



Chochan, 18 years old

Amkhola Para (Pratharaeshong Rua)

These are the livelihoods of the Rakhaine—some are farming in the paddy fields, some are going to the forest to hunt and collect wood, and others are fishing in the river. We live self-sufficiently near the forest and river, and depend upon nature for our survival.

Our history in Awazonway



Chan Aung, 20 years old

Monushe Para (Bozi Rua)

This picture depicts the trials and tribulations of our history in Awazonway. We fled from Arakan to this area in 1784AD in order to escape genocide from the Burmese army. When we arrived here it was an unpopulated and dense jungle, teeming with dangerous animals such as tigers and crocodiles. We suffered greatly due to attacks from wild animals, diseases, a lack of fresh water, famine, and devastating cyclones and tidal bores. Our forefathers managed to cope against these extreme conditions. They cleared the jungle, established rice paddies, and established our civilisation. We are a resilient community!

Our climate is changing



Jo Jo Nain, 16 years old

Kabiraz Para (Betlia Rua)

We are rice farmers, and depend upon the monsoonal rains for our livelihoods. However, nowadays the rainfall is neither predictable nor reliable. Sometimes it is rainy in the winter season, and sometimes it is hot and dry in the rainy season. When we need rain it is not coming, and when it comes to cultivation time too much rain is coming and the paddy fields become flooded. Cyclones are also happening more frequently, and I heard that the ocean is rising. I read in a science book that these changes in the climate are due to humans polluting the air and cutting down trees. I'm worried about what this changing climate will mean for our community.

We live in unity



Noen Laine, 24 years old

Kalapara (Chelapra)

We have been living together for many years as a community, and this picture represents our unity. I think our community spirit is the best part of our culture. We help each other without expecting any benefits, and if we have any problems others help us. I think this is a very simple life, as we have no cravings.

We strive to build peace



Mali San, 22 years old

Taltoli Para (Tatli Rua)

Although the Rakhaine were the first peoples in this area, now we are a minority group, and live amongst the Bengali Muslims. This picture shows a traditional Rakhaine village beside a Bengali village. We strive to maintain positive relationships with the Bengalis.

We work together



Maung Thin Kyow, 52 years old

Kabiraz Para (Betlia Rua)

If there is any kind of dispute, we gather as a community and develop a solution. Other communities, they may work individually, but we are not like that, we like to do every kind of work together.

We strive for morality



Echan Wen, 20 years old

Kuakata (Kansai Rua)

We regularly visit the village temple to receive Buddhist teachings from our monk. The monk teaches us Buddhist ethics, and how to adhere to the five noble precepts. Wherever we go and whatever we do we always try to keep these precepts in our mind: to avoid taking the life of beings; to avoid taking things not given; to refrain from lying and false speech; to avoid sexual misconduct; to abstain from substances that cause intoxication.

We are compassionate



Mr Choten, 50 years old

Amkhola Para (Pratharaeshong Rua)

When I thought of Rakhaine culture I thought of peace, so I drew a Rakhaine temple to represent that. Everyday we go together to the temple and pray for the happiness and wellbeing of all living beings, and then we ring the peace bell. The monk teaches us about Buddhism, our culture, and our language. The monk also teaches us how to meditate, how to control our minds and how to avoid doing bad things—through this practice we learn to be peaceful.

We respect our Elders



Myachokhen, 12 years old

Amkhola Para (Pratharaeshong Rua)

Full moons are a very auspicious time in our culture. We bring donations of food and robes to the monk, in order to generate good Karma, so that we will fare better in this life, and in our reincarnation. On full moons we also visit our elder's houses to pray to them, and to seek their guidance. Our monks teach us the importance of respecting and listening to our elders.

We are all equal



Maung Hla Sein, 45 years old

Misri Para (Nghashekung Rua)

In our culture, men and women are equal. In our society, men and women work together.

We respect nature



Chan Cho, 11 years old

Kabiraz Para (Betlia Rua)

We should not destroy anything from nature. Trees have life, so if we cut down a tree we are killing a life. Trees gives us oxygen, shelter and shade, and we need trees to build houses, so we must try to save trees as much as possible, and not cut too many down. The Rakhaine love nature. We rely on nature for our survival.

We cope with cyclones



Newen, 16 years old

Kabiraz Para (Betlia Rua)

Our area is highly vulnerable to cyclones and tidal bores. In 2007 we were hit by Cyclone Sidr—our village was flooded and many people and animals died. The wind blew very strong, the river rose up, waves crashed and trees toppled over. Our Elders know how to read Nature to forecast when a cyclone is coming. They teach us what to do if a cyclone hits, and how to survive. We construct our houses on stilts to protect us from the crashing waves. After a cyclone hits we work together as a community to rebuild and recover.

We celebrate festivals



Awen, 16 years old

Taltoli Para (Tatli Rua)

Festivals are an important part of our culture. In the New Year we hold Sanggreing (Water Festival) to purify ourselves for the coming year. In summer we hold a boat racing festival, and when we cultivate our rice crop we celebrate Kau Thai (New Rice Festival). We also celebrate the end of the Buddhist rain retreat, and every full moon. Nowadays it is difficult to organise such festivals because our population is low and we are poor. Our festivals are not only important for our happiness, but they also help to unite the Rakhaine community, and we always meet new people and make build new relationships. In our festivals we work together and help each other.

What was achieved?

After workshops were finished, we were able to ask participants to provide feedback on their experiences of working with us. Such an evaluation was undertaken to help us understand whether, how, and to what extent the workshops had been effective, and to reflect on what outcomes had been generated for participants, facilitators, and members of the Rakhaine community. Qualitative methods were chosen as a means to capture complex processes of social change, and because many of the perceived impacts of the arts are intangible and interpretive. Short interviews were held with participants and facilitators in order to capture their experiences, and to elicit further discussion around the artwork and stories that they had created. The findings were also triangulated with the literature and with ethnographic observations made by our team throughout the project.

Outcomes for participants

Participants told us that they thoroughly enjoyed participating in the art workshops, and found them to be rewarding, educational, and inspirational experiences. They noted that the process of expressing their ideas through creative artwork was empowering, and reported that their capacity to turn their ideas into beautiful and meaningful artwork “showed us that we can do anything if we try”. This response was also noted by the facilitators, who told us that “it was powerful to see ideas being turned into a reality”.

Participants also told us that the workshops had provided a first ever opportunity to reflect upon and share their culture as a community, and to express these reflections using art: “We had never expressed our culture before through art—this was a very new and exciting initiative”. Indeed, out of fifty participants, only one had ever used paint before: “Art programs are rare here ... This is the first time the Rakhaine have had the opportunity to do artwork like this, and express our feelings and our stories in this way, it was very beautiful.”

Participants described how the workshops were an effective and empowering learning tool:

It was a great opportunity for the older generation to come together and share their culture and experiences with the younger generation.

Storytelling is an enjoyable and effective way to learn about culture, and how to preserve it.

Our minds were opened up to new ideas and perspectives.

We learnt about the strengths of our community and our culture, how we are united, how we work together, support one another, and come together to make decisions and face problems.

We learnt about the ethics and values of our culture, and why it is important to respect and listen to the wisdom of the Elders.

When creating and sharing our art we felt the love that we have for our culture.

Through the art workshops we realised how rich our culture is, and felt inspired to revitalize and preserve this culture.

Participants revealed that “it was very nice to come together as a community—such opportunities are rare nowadays”. They described how the workshops helped to facilitate social interaction, build social cohesion and enhance sense of community (Figure 6):

Through sharing our feelings and our minds, new relationships were built, and existing friendships and loving bonds within the community were strengthened.



Figure 6. Art workshops with the Rakhaine

Outcomes for facilitators

Rakhaine facilitators described how “the training program united us to work together as a team”, and that they had “learned a lot about community development and leadership”. They told us “we feel very proud to have contributed to this project as facilitators” and “we feel very happy to work for the development of our community” (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Discussions with Rakhaine volunteer facilitators

Facilitators also described how they learnt new leadership skills, and suggested that leadership is vital for their community, especially due to their loss of unity and a lack of leadership in present times.

“This was our first time acting as leaders, and we learnt how to manage a group, how to manage the workshops, and how to communicate with one another”. They noted their desire to facilitate future workshops, and would feel confident to do so. “Next time” we were told, “we will be more confident because we have gained much experience through this program [and] we are motivated to serve our community, and improve our leadership skills”.

Outcomes for the community

Members of the community who participated in the workshops revealed that they “feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to preserve our culture in a visual form, and to share this with the world”. One older participant described how “mostly the younger generation attended the workshops, and they were very inspired ... I believe that this will have a great impact upon our sense of community and the wider Rakhaine society” (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Intergenerational engagement.

Several participants expressed the view that “the unity in our community will grow through this program”. Several suggested that “such opportunities to unite as a community—to share our opinion, our culture, and our minds—is particularly important nowadays [since] we do not often get the chance to meet or gather together and bond”.

Other outcomes

Patrick and Hannah have found the art workshops to be very powerful tools to stimulate understanding about Rakhaine culture and identity. Evaluation conversations with participants about art-making provided a means to elicit discussion about intangible dimensions of local culture and participant sentiments that could not have been feasibly discussed using a standard interview program, nor uncovered by means of participant observation.

Elaine has consolidated a growing understanding of the power and importance of emancipatory and participatory art forms as key methodologies in the geohumanities. Such programs can and should allow for deliberative engagement with local communities, in order for them to be involved in addressing the geopolitical and environmental challenges important to us all.

Concluding remarks

We hope that readers enjoy this creative representation of the cultural strengths of the Rakhaine, and encourage reflection on some of the strengths of your own cultures and sub-cultures, inviting you to ask how those strengths could be built upon to improve our collective resilience and adaptive capacity, particularly in the context of global environmental change.

The Rakhaine community art workshops exemplify what is possible. They were reportedly an enjoyable, rewarding, and educational experience for all involved. Our findings suggest that workshops had positive outcomes for individual participants, and for the Rakhaine community, and hold potential for others elsewhere.

Workshops provided convivial conditions in which to consolidate and reinscribe social cohesion and community solidarity, and enabled facilitators to improve their leadership, organisational, and interpersonal skills. Facilitators now feel confident in their capacity to organise their own community programs in the future. Participants reported that the workshops were inspiring and empowering, and developed their creativity, confidence, self-esteem, and motivation. By reflecting on and affirming the positive aspects of local culture, the Rakhaine strengthened and mobilised their cultural capacities. We conclude that community art workshops can be low-cost and effective tools to build capacities and resilience among local communities as they strive to adapt to a range of challenges including, in particular, climate change and its corollaries.

Such workshops may have a place within CBA programs. However, their effectiveness cannot ever be fully assured, since that is contingent upon their being appropriately tailored to local contexts, based on skilled facilitation, and progressing from established and congenial relationships with local communities. On this basis, we call for further research to test the capacity of community art workshops to contribute to positive development and capacity building among those communities most vulnerable to environmental, economic, and social perturbations. We also assert that robust and transparent evaluation of such programs is critical to provide an evidence base to inform policy makers, donor agencies, government and development organisations.

Afterword

Dr J. Nathan Corbitt

Thank you for *Art as Adaptation*. As I am writing this afterword, a small group of Bhutanese elders has been forced, through persecution, to relocate to a refugee community in Philadelphia. They and their extended families are struggling with the issues of lost identity and diffusion of culture similar to those faced by the Rakhaine. For several months they have engaged in creating a narrative mural of their journey that is to become a visual history for their grandchildren. I mention this experience because *Arts as Adaptation* is timely. Well written with a strong conceptual framework and community training element, the groundwork is laid for effective art-making that engenders leadership development, self-awareness, resilience, and given time, social justice. I have learned from *Art as Adaptation*.

Kirkby, Poon, and Stratford are correct. Cultural storytelling through collaborative art-making can be powerful and empowering. Who would not be encouraged after seeing and reading of the positive cultural assets of the Rakhaine? Chochan is proud of Rakhaine self-sufficiency, Chan Aung knows of their resiliency, Noen Laine admires the community spirit of “no cravings”, and Echan Wen demonstrates the valuable role of their religious devotion. Yet, there are some realists in the group who hint at the conflicts facing the community. Mali San upholds the value of maintaining positive relationships with potential and real political adversaries, and Jo Jo warns of the climatic crisis that could change it all. This is all possible through a strong training component that engages the community—young and old.

For there to be justice, if I read Amartya Sen³⁰ correctly, building capacities and providing choice are essential elements in developing positive freedom and removing injustice in the world. Reclaiming a fading identity, building on inherent cultural and religious values, strengthening intergenerational relationships, and just having an enjoyable collaborative time making works—all these are outcomes of *Art as Adaptation*. As I read participants personal reflections I could see the arts mirroring diverse realities. This project has provided real assets for creating a critical awareness about a situation lived in the Rakhaine community—a first and essential step in community-based adaptation to climate change. I look forward to, and hope for, the continued development within this community. Here we have a model for community-based adaptation in response to climate injustice that can be applied among local communities around the world.

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